

## Chapter 25

For the moment all plans were forgotten, in the rush to get away. We did split up into several smaller groups, in keeping with longstanding plans. I was with Marcus, Bantal, and Maritsa; my mother left with Brutellas, Mazi, and Talitha. I never could have found my way out alone; there were so many twists and turns in the maze of tunnels that I was soon hopelessly confused. We moved in silence, with the dim light of a single torch, our ears listening anxiously for the noise of pursuit. Our fears were groundless; no one followed after. I wondered if the discovery of our hiding place was the result of some information given to the Truth Police, or just pure accident. The fate of the others who had left earlier also concerned me, but Bantal assured me later that no one ever left by the main entry route into the meeting place.

It was still dark when we came out into a part of Tirzah that was unfamiliar to me, an area of small shops and crowded apartments, but we left that area and returned to the slums we had visited years before. We ended up in the very building from which we had left the city years before. Our other friends, the ones with my mother, were already there waiting for us, and the remaining groups, including Andreas and the lookouts, arrived over the next hour or so.

There was a quick, somewhat anxious discussion, with Bantal doing most of the talking. "One of the nobles who follows the way is Cursius, who has an estate north of the city. He has long offered to provide shelter for us, when something like this happened, as we all believed it would. We still need to move in small groups. We'll have to say off the main roads; there's a small village just out of the city where we can find shelter for the coming day. I'll send one of the young men ahead, and arrange for the brethren there to meet us on the road.

"It will take us two nights to reach Cursius, after we leave the village. The day after we travel from the village we'll have to find shelter in the fields; that's farm country, and we should be able to find a barn or a shed to rest in. The villagers may even direct us to one of the brethren there. Once we reach the estate, we'll get horses and supplies, and split up as we planned. Now, what questions do you have?"

The only one was from Brutellas, who wondered if he and Mazi could still be married. Bantal smiled. "Never fear, Brother Brutellas, we haven't forgotten. I'm sure Brother Cursius can help insure you have a fitting ceremony before you leave."

Four of the young men would be going with us. The rest, with Andreas and Tacitus, would return to their homes, or to another location in the vast catacombs, once the patrols ceased. Some of the ones left behind, who might want to leave Tirzah as well, would be on their own. We said our good-byes to those who would stay behind, and they slipped away.

Bantal asked me to lead in prayer, and after that we left the city, some of us for the last time. Garris and Doria had never been far beyond the city walls; they seemed more excited than anxious at the prospect. My mother had a light in her eyes I had not seen there before; she was joyous at the prospect of seeing her native land after so many years. Of all of us, Talitha was the quietest. Something was weighing on her mind, and I didn't think it was just concern over our fate.

When we were well away from the city walls, we split up into our groups, and I had no chance to speak to her. Feeling Marcus's hand firmly grasping mine was a great comfort and assurance, but I spent the waning hours of the night wondering what was going on with my sister. We approached the village before dawn, and several of the local Brethren met us there, as Bantal had promised. The villagers took us to separate houses, and I still had no chance to speak to Talitha.

The folk there were poor, but they were very kind to us. They fed us better than they did themselves, and gave us their sleeping mats to rest our heads. One of them kept watch over us throughout the coming day, while we slept and after we awoke. All of them were tenants on the large estate in the area, and their master was a rabid supporter of the Bear. Had we been discovered, they would have suffered the same fate as we did.

Our trip to Cursius's estate was uneventful. The villagers directed us to other believers along the way, and we had no difficulty evading the few patrols we saw at night. Most of the Bear's troops were guarding the frontier against the Korei, who appeared to give up only to reappear days later. We continued to travel in small groups, and I never had an opportunity to speak to Talitha alone.

Cursius's home was a big villa, set amid fields and orchards, on a rise overlooking the village where his tenants and slaves lived. He was a brusque, busy man, full of nervous energy, but kind, nonetheless. His tall, spare form stood in marked contrast to his wife, Anita, a short, plump woman, as quiet and reserved as her husband was outgoing and aggressive. Their household staff was friendly and efficient, and didn't hesitate to call us brothers and sisters.

Bantal and Cursius were old friends. It had been Bantal, in fact, who led the man to Christ. The arrangement to use the estate as a way station for an escape was longstanding one, though one that had never been used until now.

We were shown to our rooms, all comfortable if plain. For the first time, Marcus and I had a private room to ourselves. Perhaps this would be the time, at last, when we could share our wedding bed.

The time came when Talitha and I could be alone for a few minutes. She was obviously bursting to tell me something. I could hardly imagine what had her both so excited and so disturbed.

"Alright, sister mine, what's going on? You've been as nervous as a mouse in an eagle's nest for the past few days."

She smiled at my lame attempt at humor. "You know I told you the Lord called me to protect you, but...you have Marcus for that now."

"Yes, that's true, and you did your job well."

"Well, Brutellas and Mazi are going south, to the Kore. I want to go with them."

"Why, I think that would be great. I would miss you terribly, but you must go where the Lord calls you. I know Brutellas and Mazi would be happy for the help."

She paused before answering. "Well – I'm not stopping there. I think my place is with Diotrophes, in the Badlands."

It was my turn to pause. “But – won’t that be dangerous? I know you can take care of yourself, but the Badlands are not a good place for a young woman, even one like you.”

She smiled again. “Wherever we go is dangerous. The Lord watched over me there for weeks before, and I know he will again. That’s where my calling is, Lysia, and I know Diotrophes and I are destined for each other just as surely as you and Marcus.”

There was nothing else to say. We embraced, and went to rejoin the others. Early that evening, we had the wedding ceremony for Brutellas and Mazi, finally. The expression on my young friend’s face was so beautiful that I couldn’t stop myself from crying, and didn’t try. Very few of the other eyes in the room were dry.

After the wedding, brief as it was, we shared a meal together, and talked about arrangements for our departure. Cursius was outfitting two parties, without complaint or compromise. One of the young watchmen, Partius, would be going north with us; there were eight in our group in all. Three of the young men would be going south with Brutellas, Mazi, and Talitha, so there would be six of them.

We had not slept since the day before, so we were all weary, and ready for bed, before the evening advanced very far. Alas, it was not to be. One of Cursius’s servants rushed up to him as we were sitting together in his dining hall, and he turned pale. He asked us to excuse him, and rushed hurriedly from the room. Those of us who were left looked at one another with a growing sense of alarm, and all conversation ceased.

Cursius returned minutes later, and we listened expectantly as he stood at the head of the table. He didn’t need to ask for silence; no one spoke. The nervousness we had seen moments before was gone; he was all business again.

“One of the brethren from another estate to the south arrived to give us some bad news. Somehow, word has gotten out that there are wanted fugitives here, and a large party of the Truth Police is headed this way. They’ll be here in a couple of hours. I probably could hide you in the village, but I don’t want to take that chance. I don’t think anyone here would betray you, but a few gold coins would go a long way for a poor peasant or a slave.

“The horses are being packed even now. Those of you heading north should have no problem; Bantal knows the route well, and you’ll be moving away from the patrols. The others, though, will be headed right toward the trouble. I’m sending one of my servants with you, one I trust totally, to lead you in a safe path around the soldiers. You should gather any personal possessions you have, and meet me at the stables in a few minutes. I’ll say my goodbyes to you there.”

He hurried out of the room again, and the rest of us wasted no time in heading off to our rooms. I looked regretfully at the bed I would never sleep in. Our belongings were few, and gathering them took little time. Marcus and I arrived at the stables just as most of the others were filing in. The last to arrive were Brutellas and Maxi, disappointment written all over their faces. I knew how they felt.

We had no time for long farewells. Marcus had to pry Talitha and me apart; we couldn’t stop crying, and neither of us wanted to let go. It was almost as bad for Marcus and Brutellas; they tried their best not to break down and weep, but didn’t quite succeed. The two of them had never been apart for more than a few days for their whole lives.

With the worst of the farewells past, we said a hurried good-bye to Cursius, with profuse expressions of gratitude that he brushed aside. At the foot of the hill below the villa, our group headed north, while Cursius's servant took the others cross country, to the west. Barely an hour had passed since Cursius had told us of the oncoming pursuit.

Bantal passed the word to us of his plans as we rode along at a fast clip. Besides the eight mounts, we had four pack animals, so we were a considerable party who raised a lot of dust and made a lot of noise. That didn't seem to concern Bantal, who was in the lead with Maritsa.

There was, he said, a wooded area about an hour ahead of us, and a secluded place off the main trail where we should be able to rest. It would take the Truth Police about an hour to reach the estate yet, and at least another hour to search the estate and the village. Even if they took off after us in the dark, which wasn't likely, we would already be in our retreat by the time they entered the forest, which was quite dense.

The hiding place Bantal selected was a little vale hidden away behind a stand of closely packed evergreens and bushes. The entrance to it was on the opposite side from the trail; coming into it directly was almost impossible, even on foot.

Once we were settled in, not daring to light a fire, but relying on torches, our leader shared his plans with us. We were all bone-tired, so we listened with only half our attention, or less.

"Beyond this forest is the eastern pass through the Parnath," Bantal said quietly, the weariness in his own voice undisguised. "Reaching it on the main trail, assuming we aren't pursued, will take about two nights of riding. We'll spend the rest of this night and all of tomorrow resting here, because there is no good place to stop until we are well into the pass. Tomorrow afternoon, I'll send out Partius to scout for us, to make sure we aren't being followed. Now, let's all get some rest."

No one needed a second invitation. I don't think any of us stirred until well into the next day. The only thing that woke me up was the sound of the horses crashing about in search of food or water. Somewhere into my fogged brain crept the idea that all of that noise would not be a good thing if anyone passed near our hiding place. I came awake immediately with that thought, and sat up. Marcus stirred next to me, but didn't awaken at the point.

Someone else had already thought of the problem. Fortunately, there was a small brook just outside the vale, on the side where we entered, and Partius was already preparing to lead a group of the horses to drink. So that he wouldn't have to make two trips, and to avoid making any more noise, I got up, and attached the packhorses to their guide rope, and led them, with two of the mounts, along behind Partius. He knew what he was about, and kept his group in an orderly line even without a guide rope.

By the time we returned, the others were stirring, all in good spirits after several hours of uninterrupted sleep. My mother took charge of preparing breakfast for us; now that it was daylight, we dared to light a fire. I was amazed at how good food cooked over a campfire could taste; that certainly had not been my experience up to that point.

After we ate, I found myself, by her design, sitting next to my mother. She seemed anxious to talk to me, and I certainly did not mind hearing whatever she had to say.

“Lysia, dear, you know I’ve told you about your father, and about Berith, many times. There are some things, though, I’ve never told you, and I think you need to know them. Lithnor, your father, was – is – a leader among our people. For many years, we tried to bargain with the slave traders, who live in the Parnath. To keep the peace, to stay alive even, we – made an arrangement with them. Each year, they came, and – this is difficult for me – selected a certain number of our young men and women to take with them. It was either that, or see us all killed or driven away from our homes.”

I was horrified, but I said nothing, so she continued after a pause that stretched out for several minutes. “One year, the last year, they made new demands on us. They wanted, not just the best of our young people, but some of the children as well. They wanted you, Lysia, and several others. When we refused, they attacked us and destroyed our village. Lithnor sent us away, while he and several of the men in the village fought the slave traders. We were a peaceful people, and our only weapons were those we used for hunting.

“I did not know what happened to Lithnor, but I didn’t see him fall. My prayer is that he is safe. There were three other women and four other children with us when we escaped. Crossing the Parnath was a nightmare, and two of the women, along with three of the children, died in the passes. One of those women lost two children, and went mad. She jumped off of a cliff before anyone could stop her.”

She paused again to catch her breath, and rushed on. “When we reached Tirzah, we were separated from the other woman and her child. We, you and I, were picked up by soldiers, and taken to the slave market. The rest of that story you know. The other woman who was still alive was more fortunate than I, or at least I thought so at the time. She married a man of Tirzah, a nobleman, and the man took the child as his own. He angered the Great Bear at an official banquet a few years later, though, and he was executed. The woman and her son escaped, and I believe they ended up among the Korei. Portius described a young man there among the Grass Weavers that fit his description, but his mother wasn’t there. He used his Korei name, but I’m pretty sure it was the same boy.”

A sudden insight flooded into my mind. “What was his name, his real name, Mother?”

：“Why, that’s right, you mentioned him in the catacombs. I should have made the connection right away, but there was just too much happening. It was the young man who rescued you from Demetrius, Nociar.”