

Chapter 26

By the time nightfall came, we were not only thoroughly rested, but eager to move on. Partius reported no evidence of any pursuit. Our fear was that the police had picked up the trail of our friends instead, but I felt in my spirit that they were safe. We were in good spirits as we rode along, and despite having to refrain from talking aloud, Marcus and I conversed in excited whispers.

I couldn't bring myself to condemn my father or the leaders of the village in Berith for what they had done. If they had fought to begin with, the village would have been destroyed years before, and I probably would never have been born. They had been faced with an impossible choice, and in the end had taken a stand, however futile.

Marcus and I, riding so close by each other that our legs brushed together, talked about what my mother had said, but even more about the Parnath.

"My mother says that the slave traders still live there. We're headed for the middle of their territory. They're even worse than the outlaw gangs. Besides that, the pass we'll be crossing goes above the snowline at one point, and there's snow there even in summer. Winter has already started up in the mountains, and we could be in for some very rough travel. The only advantage is that the slavers don't come out much in the winter. They hole up in their camps, in the valleys."

"I guess that's a good thing," Marcus whispered back, "but I'd almost rather take my chances with the slave traders. How can you fight a blizzard?"

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of hooves coming up fast behind us, ringing off the stones in the trail. We quickly moved to the side of the trail, which wasn't easy in this section with trees crowding close in.

There were only three riders when the horses finally thundered past. Each of them carried torches aloft, and I could see their faces clearly outlined in the flickering flames. The one in the lead was Nociar; close behind him was Crispan, then a man I had never seen before. Expecting they were being pursued, we waited in our hiding place a while, but no other sounds came to us. Bantal sent Partius back along the trail, but he returned an hour later to report there was no one else.

To say I was astonished by what I had seen would be an understatement. I had assumed that Crispan was either still with the Korei, or had been killed when his planned surprise attack had failed.

When we resumed our ride, Bantal said, "I recognized one of those men. He was in one of the villages where we stopped. I didn't like the looks of him then; he was probably the one who gave us away to the Truth Police. Who the other two were, I don't know."

"Marcus and I know them well, unfortunately," I replied. "The one in the lead was Nociar, and behind him was Crispan. They probably plan to overtake us, so they can talk us into taking them along. How they survived this long I have no idea, but Crispan obviously still plans to go to the Hagath shrine. I'm just sorry we saved them from the outlaws."

We saw evidence of a campsite for Crispan's party later on, but they were still ahead of us. That changed on our first night in the Parnath.

We had resumed traveling in daylight, unwilling to take chances in the mountains at night. The lower slopes of the pass were still free of ice and snow, though there was a decided chill in the air when the sun went behind the peaks that afternoon. My mother was the only one of us with any knowledge of what we would find, and her memory wasn't clear after all of the years that had intervened since her journey.

"I believe there should be a campsite over the next hill," she said, "but I'm not sure. It might not even be there anymore."

Her memory had not failed her, this time anyway. We topped a rise in late afternoon, momentarily warmed by the sun's rays once more. A path led down to the left just over the top of the hill, away from the main trail. We turned down the trail, which was a little steep. After about ten minutes of slow going, we heard a challenge from a spot in the rocks, above the trail.

"Don't come any further," said a voice in perfect Tirzan. "I can kill half of you before you can take cover."

I recognized the voice at once. "Nociar! It's me, Lysia."

There was a brief pause. "The gods be praised, Lysia. We thought we must have missed you on the trail, when we never caught up with you. Ride on to the campsite. Crispan and Alexi are there already. I'll let them know you're coming, but I'll have to come back and keep watch."

I glanced over at Marcus. His face was almost purple with rage. He made no secret of his feelings for the slave trader.

"I know, Marcus," I said in a low voice, "but we may need them. Please don't start anything yet. There will be time enough for revenge later."

I didn't tell him that revenge shouldn't even be an option for a Christian. It was enough just now to keep him from a killing rage.

He shot a look at me. "You have no more reason to trust him than I do. How in the name of all that's holy can he be of any help?"

"We're going to be passing through the middle of the raiders' territory. We may have to fight our way through. Besides, there's one thing you don't know about Nociar."

"And that would be – what?"

My mother hadn't told me; the Lord had just then whispered it in my mind. "His family is the Bearer of Secrets for the Hagath. He alone may be able to interpret the clues that will get you safely to the treasure, and safely back again."

His eyes widened, and his mouth opened, then snapped shut again. His face went from red to white; a great struggle was taking place in his mind. In the end, greed won out over revenge.

“Okay – we’ll take them with us, for now. My eye will be on that snake Crispan every minute, and if he so much as spits too close to me, or to you, I’ll run him through where he stands.”

When we arrived at the campsite, Nociar was just leaving, to return to his lookout post. He gave us a wave, then disappeared among the trees. Crispan and Alexi stood up as we rode into the clearing.

Our exchange of greetings was polite, but without warmth. Marcus maintained a stony silence, not deigning to acknowledge Crispan’s words of welcome. We set about taking care of our horses, and clearing a place for our blanket rolls. My mother and Maritsa set about making preparations for our meal. I went to get water, and the men went to gather more firewood. Alexi kept sending furtive glances toward us, as if fearful we would exact revenge on him, at least, for his presumed betrayal. The best word I could use to describe him was greasy; my skin crawled when he looked my way before turning quickly away.

Crispan had lost weight since I had seen him last, at the outlaw camp. He looked lean and hard, but the same light of greed still shone in his eyes. I recognized the look well; my husband wore it constantly.

As darkness fell, Nociar returned, and Alexi went to take his place. I could tell he was dying to talk to me, so after he ate, I went and sat beside him. Marcus didn’t seem to mind; after all, here might well be the key to gaining the treasure he so coveted.

He began telling his tale almost as soon as I sat down. “I recognized your sister from the day she escaped from Demetrius, the day you were captured. Her name is Talitha, right? After you and Talitha – I assume it was you with her – rescued us from the outlaws, we rode north toward the Mardath. I thought I could find the pathway through again, but it was unnecessary. There was a lot of dry ground, and we could see where another group had gone through recently. We thought it might be Marcus and his party, so Crispan was eager to follow after. When we reached the Kor, it was at such a low ebb that we crossed where there would once have been a strong current.

“We saw a grass fire upstream, but it was burning away from us; the grass was already blackened where we were, so we felt safe it going on. I thought about trying for the Grass Weavers’ camp, since I still carried their medallion, but we never joined up. We came upon a party of them who had prisoners with them, but they didn’t see us. I was certain I recognized Marcus and Brutellas, and told Crispan we should try to help. He insisted we would accomplish nothing but endanger our own lives, so we went on. I’m glad to see he got away, but what about Brutellas?”

“Brutellas is fine,” I replied. “I’ll tell you about all of that later.”

He nodded, and continued his story. “Well, we eventually ran into, literally, a band of Ghost Talkers. They would have killed us right then, but I claimed the right of sanctuary, and showed them my Grass Weaver medallion. They took us back to their encampment, which was huge. I never so many Korei in one place before. Besides the Ghost Talkers, there were warriors from many of the other bands. It was a war party; they had no women or children with them.

“They were planning to attack Tirzah, because their flocks were starving, even though their part of the Kore wasn’t as hard hit as the areas to the south and east. The next day after we got to their camp, they would have turned us out, but Crispan had me tell them I had lived once in Tirzah, and had information that would help them. They had a Talking, and decided they would give us a chance to prove our words.

“When we got closer to Tirzah, the scouts reported seeing a large force from the city, well out into the Kor. We stayed behind in camp, and the greater part of the warriors went out to dispose of the Bear’s army. They returned a few days later in bunches, their heads hung down like whipped dogs. The war chief who led them was run through with a spear by the high chieftain.

“It took them a little while to regain their courage, but there was no thought of turning back; better to die in battle, the chiefs said, than to die of hunger and disgrace.

“This time, they actually came up with a plan, instead of charging straight ahead like a herd of stampeding cattle. The larger force would attack the main fortifications; a raiding party had been stopped by a makeshift line of defense, but it wouldn’t stand up to a determined assault. Meanwhile, another band would move west to a small gate in the wall, lightly defended. I had told Crispan about the gate before, because it would be an easier way to enter the city than the main gate, and he told the Korei. The Korei had already paid some of the Bear’s Own, inside the gates, to open the way for them.

“At first, it seemed the plan was working perfectly, and I wasn’t too sad about it. Tirzah had not been kind to me. The gates were opened to us, and the Korei streamed through it. At that moment, though, reinforcements arrived from out of nowhere. There was some hard fighting, but in the end, the Ghost Talkers had to fall back. Crispan and I managed to escape into the city in the confusion. He shaved the beard he had been growing, in case the Korei had their friends looking for us.

“We thought you might be in the city, especially when we heard about some prisoners that had escaped from the Truth Police. Crispan suggested I become a Christian, so I could find out where you were hiding. We knew about the catacombs; it was common knowledge. No one knew just where the hideout was, though, and I knew well enough that going down into the maze without a guide was an easy way to die.

“I contacted some of the believers I found out about, but they weren’t taken in as easily as I thought they would be. They knew very well that my profession of faith was a lie, and they sent me away empty-handed. Somehow, though, Crispan managed to get close to one of the officers in the Truth Police, and we got wind of a raid on the Christians. We tagged along with one of the patrols, but by the time we got to the cavern where they had been, they had already fled. Some of the patrols made a half-hearted attempt to follow, but they had no idea where to go from there.

“We finally decided you, and the other Christians, must have escaped from the city, and Crispan was certain you must still be headed north. We rode out with a patrol of the Truth Police a couple of days later. At one of the villages, we came across Alexi, who said he had seen your group, and had overheard your plans to rest at the estate of Cursius.

“When we left the village, Alexi begged us to let him tag along; he was afraid he wouldn’t live long after we left, once the other villagers learned of his betrayal. Crispan let him come, mainly because he thought we could use an extra hand in the mountains.

“We reached the estate, but the Truth Police found no one, even after turning the estate upside down. Cursius was too powerful to arrest without any evidence, so we left him alone. Back on the road, there was a good bit of milling about, as the leaders tried to decide what to do next. They finally decided to make camp, and send out scouts to see if they could pick up a trail the next morning.

“When the scouts were sent out, one group of them returned to report evidence of a group of horses moving south, off of the main trail. The ones sent north were recalled; for some reason, the Truth Police didn’t think your group would split up. We weren’t so sure. When we reached the spot where the scouts picked up the trail, we followed it for a while, but lost it in a rocky area, and didn’t find it again.

“Crispan and I decided it was a wild goose chase, he was convinced you were headed north, though he didn’t know at that point if Marcus was still alive. At the first chance, we broke away, with Alexi, and followed the trail north. When we got close to the forest, it was almost night again, but I saw fresh hoof prints, and was sure you had passed by within the past day.

“We set off at a gallop, hoping to overtake you, but we must have missed you somehow. When we reached the campsite here, Crispan was confident you would have to stop here on your way through the Parnath. The rest you know.”

By the time he finished, several of the party were getting ready for sleep, and Marcus called me over to join him. He was anxious to know what I learned, but disappointed when I told him that the Hagath had not yet come up in conversation.

“Patience, husband,” I said, playfully tugging on his fresh beard, “we have a long while yet before we reach Berith.”

“Don’t remind me,” he grumbled. “We gained a little time in the trip to Tirzah, over what you had told me, but now we’re behind schedule. If we lose much time in the Parnath, we might as well forget it – until next year. I’d hate to have to spend a year there.”

I was exasperated. When he tried to put his arm around me when we lay down together, I turned away from him. He grunted something unintelligible, and turned away himself. We spent that night with our backs to each other.