

Chapter 27

We awoke next morning with a coating of frost on our blankets. I couldn't remember pulling my blanket over my head in the night, but immediately realized why I – or Marcus – had done it when I poked my head out.

Partius had already stoked the fire, and almost as one we rolled out of our stiff blankets and huddled shivering around the flames. Bantal pointed out that we all had furs in our saddle bags, and went at once to take out his and Maritsa's. He wasn't alone; we soon looked like a collection of hairy beasts, with only our faces visible.

My mother, usually shy and reserved in company, took the lead in the conversation after we had eaten. "We will soon be climbing into the high passes. In the winter, the snow drifts badly in some places, and it will be hard going even for our horses. There are caves along the way that we can use for shelter; so as long as we don't have a blizzard we should survive the passage. Some of the men should kill some fresh meat for us here, because our bodies will need a lot of fuel. The Lord is with us, so we need have no fear. Beyond the high passes is the territory of the slave raiders; may God truly have mercy on us if we fall among them."

Nociar and Partius, who both had bows, went out hunting after breakfast, and returned carrying a big elk between them in late morning. We skinned the animal, cut the hide into wide strips, and tied up as much meat as we thought we could carry on the horses in the strips. The rest of the meat we shared in our lunch and dinner, with some left over for breakfast the next day. We thought it best not to head out in the middle of the day, since my mother said the next camping area was a good day's journey up into the pass.

The next morning, we arose early, this time to a dusting of snow. We rode with our furs on, except for Nociar. The cold had little apparent effect on him. Once we reached the bottom of the little hill that with the trail that led to the entrance to our camp, the slope ahead was much higher, if not any steeper. We reached the top around midday, and all stopped as one to gaze in wonder.

Breaking through the clouds that had brought the snow, the sun lit a stunning of panorama of white peaks, where snow still swirled. As if swept aside by a giant hand, the clouds rushed away from the mountain tops as well, and the white peaks were framed in a stunning blue.

My mother pointed to the right, and, almost in a whisper, said, "We must go there."

There was an almost audible gasp. Where she pointed was a low place between two peaks, but still high above where we sat our horses. The blanket of white began far below the top of the pass.

We rode on in silence. Even Crispan, usually pompous in his air of false bravado, said nothing for a long while. He and Marcus studiously avoided each other, which suited me just fine. When we were in camp, they glared at each other from time to time, but otherwise stayed as far away as possible.

Gareth and Doria were the quietest couple in our group, even more so than Bantal and Maritsa. Whenever I spoke to them, they were always warm and friendly, but they never started a conversation on their own. Both of them had spent their whole lives in Tirzah,

and I knew it couldn't be easy for them to leave all that was familiar. They weren't accustomed to travel, and life in the open, but they never complained. Their faces might speak volumes of how weary they were, and they might mount and dismount stiffly, but no complaint ever passed their lips. The love they held for each other was truly a thing of beauty; I never saw two people more obviously and eloquently in love with one another.

Bantal, for all the fact that he was a librarian, was physically tough, as well as mentally and spiritually. He had worked on his estate along side his servants and slaves for years, and there was not an ounce of fat on him. Maritsa appeared soft and feminine, but she was almost as tough and strong as her husband.

Our youngest member, Partius, was a bundle of life, full of frantic energy that never seemed to flag. Tall and lank, he ran more often than he walked. He wasn't much over twenty years old, but his words were measured, and he thought carefully about each decision he made. His temperament was such a contrast to his physical being that he was like two people rolled into one.

As my mother predicted, we reached a campsite near nightfall. It wasn't as sheltered and private as the last one, but there was water nearby, and a rock overhang that afforded some protection from the weather, if not from the wind. The next day, we knew, would take us into the true Parnath; we would leave the trees behind, and climb into the snow band. I lay awake beside Marcus a while, pressed into his arms, but soon fell asleep. We were all dead tired, even though we were becoming accustomed to long days in the saddle.

Marcus took his turn at watch duty during the night, and I awoke alone, and cold. A moment of panic seized me until I remembered. Mari, my mother, was already at the fire, and the delicious smell of roasted meat reached my nostrils as soon as I poked my head out. We slept now with our furs under the blankets, to stay warm and keep the furs dry, and I pulled mine around me as I got up and went to where my mother sat, tending the spit. It was barely light outside the overhang, and we were the first to rise, other than Marcus, who was shivering somewhere out in the cold.

My mother turned as she heard me stir, and smiled as I came and sat beside her at the fire. "Good morning, daughter. Are things well with you?"

"God is good, my mother, His name be praised."

It had become a daily ritual, this greeting. A thought crossed my mind, not for the first time, and this time I voiced it. "Mother, is Nociar a Bearer of Secrets?"

My voice dropped to a whisper; I didn't know who might be awake and listening. A startled look came over her face.

"Why, yes, but how did you know that? Did he tell you?"

"No, the Lord did, the day we found him and the others. I told Marcus, to keep him from killing Crispan."

A low moan escaped her lips. "And Crispan probably knows, too. There will be no keeping them from the temple once we reach Berith. I hope they don't fight over the treasure, but I'm afraid someone will die before it's all over."

We spoke no more of it then, because at that point Bantal and Maritsa joined us, followed soon after by the others. Marcus came in from the outside, his face white with cold. Doria had spotted some herbs she said made a good tea, and since we no longer had ale, Marcus gulped down a large, steaming mug of it as soon as she heated the water. He made a face at the taste, but it seemed to drive the cold away. I tried a little of it, too; it left a bitter aftertaste, but the heat felt good on this cold morning, if nothing else.

That afternoon, we reached the snow line, and the trail became treacherous in spots. The horses had to pick their way carefully, and we covered less distance than we had before. Up to this point, the trail had gone more or less up one hill and down the other side in a straight line; that changed, too. Now it wound around the side of the mountain, and in places it narrowed, with a sheer drop on one side that ended in jagged rocks far below. Crispan lost all semblance of bravado; his face was chalky white, and he clutched his horse's bridle with a death grip. I almost felt sorry for him – but not quite.

At one point, the trail became so narrow, we had to dismount, and lead our horses. We had to pry Crispan off of his horse; he was last in line, and we had to stop repeatedly to allow him to catch up. He insisted on walking sideways, clutching at the rock face with both hands, desperately seeking any available hold. There were some scary moments when the horses themselves slipped, and flailed for balance, but we made it safely past the bad spots.

Darkness fell before we found a place to stop, and we crept along with the light of torches; there was no moon, as the clouds had returned. The wind began to whip around, and more than once someone's torch went out. We tried to keep one of the torches sheltered from the wind, which we accomplished by having Partius ride low in the saddle, holding the torch on the far side of his horse's body away from the wind. Crispan actually shrieked in fear when his torch went out at one point; if I hadn't been so cold and miserable, I would have laughed.

At last, we saw the dark mouth of a cave off to one side of the trail. It was big enough for us and for our horses. That was just as well, because they probably wouldn't have survived the night. There was no fuel in the cave for a fire, and no one had any heart to go looking for brush. We all collapsed into our blankets and furs, not bothering to even post a guard. Outside, the howling of the wind grew louder, and I wondered numbly if it carried snow with it.

To my astonishment, once I remembered the night before, I awoke to the smell of roasted meat, and the crackle of flames. The wind had subsided during the night; I could no longer hear the howling that had assaulted our ears when we lay down to sleep.

Once again, Mari sat by the fire, but she was not alone. Partius was there, too, though to say he was sitting quietly was not quite accurate. Even when he sat down, he was still fidgeting, his legs and arms always in motion. A pile of snow-covered brush lay beyond the smoky fire; I had no doubt who had gone out into the cold morning to collect it.

The water boiling in the pot had to be melted snow, because I saw no evidence of water in the cave itself. This morning I had no reservations about either the snow or Doria's herbs; it was more delicious than the smoothest ale, or the most decadent wine. I hoped she had collected a good supply; everyone but Crispan and Alexi indulged.

Partius addressed us after we ate. “We had some new snow during the night, but not too much. The sun is out, but it will be cold. I took a look ahead, and the trail ahead doesn’t look as bad as what we experienced yesterday. I didn’t go far, though, and the trail curves out of sight up ahead.”

“We should leave at once,” Bantal responded. “Mari tells me the next shelter is a hard day’s ride, and there may well be drifts over the trail in places. The wind will have blown the snow all about, and it will collect in places. If we get into a snow storm on the trail, we’ll have to find a place to stop, any place, and hunker down until there’s a break. There’s another problem we’ll encounter as we go higher as well. Tell them, Mari.”

She seemed reluctant to respond, but finally said, “The snow sometimes accumulates to a depth of a hundred feet or more on some of the slopes above the trail. Sometimes, it breaks loose, and all of it comes crashing down at once. That’s called an avalanche, and it can bury anything, and anyone, in its path. We lost part of our group to one when we crossed the mountains from Berith. Even a loud noise can set one off; when we reach areas where these happen, we must be very quiet. Even a shout or the neighing of a horse might set one off.”

The idea of what could happen in the hours, and days, ahead, sobered us all. Marcus looked grim; Crispan was all but catatonic. It astounded me that such a great coward had managed to come this far at all, but greed was his prevailing passion. It was the engine that drove him on, despite all of the dangers that might lie ahead. As to me, though I was concerned, I was confident that the Lord was still in control. After we prayed, I was almost cheerful. Besides Crispan, the only one who seemed close to panic was Alexi. Partius was still ready to conquer the world; he loved a challenge, even while appreciating the dangers.

As Bantal warned, we did come across drifts that day, but none of them were so deep that our horses couldn’t plow through. We had to stop and allow our mounts to recover a few times, but they fared well. In some places, the wind had blown the snow off patches of scraggly grass, and we took time to gather some of it for the horses. It didn’t afford much nutrition, but at least it helped ease their hunger.

There was no blizzard that day, but we ran into and out of fitful squalls of snow. Toward evening, sooner than we thought, we found the next cave. To our surprise, this one was stocked with wood and hay. None of us, not even my mother, could hazard a guess as to who might have been responsible. Other than the fact that the owners might suddenly appear and claim their cache, we didn’t really care. We were just thrilled to be able to feed our horses, and to have wood for a decent fire.

After some discussion, we thought it wise, if nothing else, to post a guard at the mouth of the cave, to keep a watch in case someone appeared in the night to set up camp. Before we had even lain down to sleep for the night, we heard a shout from outside the cave. Nociar, who was on watch, stepped outside, and almost immediately came back in. With him was a man whose every form and feature seemed familiar to me. I heard a scream, and looked around to see my mother faint dead away on the ground.