

Chapter 28

“*Q’nai p’era q’visnia!*”

“Greetings in the name of the Lord!” It was my native tongue.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than his eyes turned toward the sound of the scream. He threw out his arms with a shout, and rushed to the fallen form of my mother.”

“*Mari! Mari! M’nis m’nei!*”

His voice spoke the words “my beloved wife” as he knelt and cradled my mother’s head in my arms. No one had to tell me who he was; I had known the moment my eyes fell on his huge form. Lithnor, my father, was very much alive.

Tears streaming down my face, I watched as my mother opened her eyes, and the years dropped away from her. She was a young bride again, gazing with unbounded rapture into the eyes of the love she once thought lost to her forever. I waited while they ravished one another with kisses and embraces stored up for more than a dozen years. When my father at last turned his head toward the rest of us, most of whom still didn’t grasp what was going on, I moved to his side, and knelt down in turn.

“*Pri’es m’lexi. M’su m’isia, Lysia.*”

“Blessings on you, dearest father,” I said. “I am your daughter, Lysia.”

He swung his head slowly toward me, tears rushing down his face anew, and released my mother to place one huge hand on each of my shoulders.

“How beautiful you are in the Lord,” he said, his voice choked with emotion. “I never hoped to see you again. Praise be to our Lord, Jesus Christ.”

The next moment, he crushed me to his bosom, and I almost despaired of breathing before he let me go. When I looked around, everyone in the cave, even dour Alexi, was smiling. Nociar must have told them what was happening.

We talked into the small hours of the night, the three of us, trying to catch each other up on the missing years. Lithnor and some of the other men had escaped that day of the awful raid, along with a few of the women and older children. He did not know we had escaped; his assumption had always been that we had been captured along with the others taken away as slaves. He refused to even consider the possibility we had been killed.

“After the *Parnath’oi* left, those of us who survived went further north into Berith, farther away from the mountains. Some of the other villages helped us, but they refused to let us stay. They were afraid we would bring the slavers down on them as well. We were cursed, they said. Finally, we came to a place where no one lived, because the *Berith’oi* believed it was cursed. It was the valley of the Hagath; the ruins of the city are there, and the temple is in the midst of the ruins. Nobody lived there but the ghosts of the priests, and the wolves and bears who came in sometimes from the cold.

“We were afraid, but we were desperate. We set up a camp on the rim of the valley, and planted crops, for it was spring when we arrived. No ghosts haunted us, and no curse befell us, so we built houses. From time to time, others came to see what was going on,

and some of these stayed. Then, three years ago, something happened that changed our lives forever.”

His eyes twinkled here, and he all but laughed aloud as he went on. “Did you not notice that I called on the name of Jesus, my lost loves? A man came to us from far away, from Tirzah. How he survived the Parnath and the Parnath’oi, I do not know, but he did. He said the Lord had sent him to Berith to tell us of the only true God. I asked him if he had heard any news there of any of our brethren. He said that one of them, a woman, had led him to Christ, but the name was not one I recognized. Her name was Nyla.”

I gasped here, and he looked quickly at me. “What? Did you know her?”

“She was my foster mother in Tirzah for a while, but I’ll tell you that story later. Go on, please, Father.”

“Well, there’s not much more to tell, except how I came to be here. About six months ago, I began having a dream, the same dream over and over. In it, I was going deep into the passes of the Parnath to prepare the way for a group of travelers from the south. Just that, no more, but it was so persistent, I could not ignore it. Finally, after a month of this, I consulted our elders, and we prayed for guidance. We decided that I would take two men from the village, and some horses. We would take hay and wood into the passes, and leave them in the places the Lord directed.

“I did not know how we get past the Parnath’oi, but I knew the Lord was in charge. Several times, we heard horses and voices, and were certain we must be discovered when we tried to hide. Once, a warrior looked directly at us in our hiding place, but turned away as if he had seen nothing. I believe the Lord hid us. Anyway, we gathered wood and dried grass in the last valley before the high passes, and put them in three caves, one on the other side of the pass, and the other two on this side. After that, we hid ourselves as best we could, and lived on what we could find and hunt. When it was clear that the snows would come to the high passes before anyone could arrive, we crossed over the pass and stocked the first cave to last out the winter. I came down here once a week to check on this cave – and here you are!”

After that, we shared our own stories, and it gave me great joy to see the alternate looks of fear and wonder crossing my father’s face. The others were already sound asleep when we finished. We decided reluctantly we should get some sleep ourselves. All too soon, I was awakened by the sounds of morning activity in the cave, but I felt as refreshed as if I had slept the whole night through.

My father had picked up some Tirzan from the missionary, but I translated for him as he addressed us after our morning meal. “The other cave is a hard day’s journey from here, and it’s a hard climb, even with horses. In some places, there are deep drifts you almost have to swim through, and we’re in the avalanche zone. I came here on foot, so I can go back on foot.”

In spite of his protests, we redistributed the load of one of the packhorses, and put my father on it. It was small for him; his feet almost dug the ground. I let him have mine, which was a little higher, if not much. After I mounted the packhorse, we set off up the mountain trail once more.

The snow moved in around noon; it was hard to tell time, when you couldn't see the sun. At first, the flakes fell in lazy swirls whipped about by the wind, but the storm grew steadily worse. My father, who knew the route by now, was in the lead. As the storm approached blizzard strength, and visibility fell almost to zero, he motioned us to the left, away from the trail. There was a narrow canyon there, and one wall leaned over enough to afford some shelter if we pressed against the wall.

We stayed there for what seemed hours, every one of us aware that we would be dead if we had to spend the night here. I prayed earnestly all the time we were there, as I'm sure the others did, if not all to the true God. Finally, I had no idea after how long, the wind and snow ceased so suddenly that for some time we all just sat, our ears straining to hear what was no longer there.

What we saw back on the trail wasn't what we anticipated. Instead of burying the pass in more feet of snow, the blizzard's winds had scoured it clean. We moved rapidly up the trail after that, and I marveled that the Lord could work his wonders even in the midst of the storm. It was not quite dark when we heard a shout from up ahead, and two men came bounding down the hill toward us. The men from Berith had recognized my father, and knew that their wait was over at last.

Their names were Sentior and Narga. They were both young men, but not as big and strong as my father; I took a measure of selfish pride in that. We exchanged quick greetings, and followed them into the nearby cave. A cheery fire was already burning, and meat was roasting on the spit. More than that, there was fresh bread cooking on the stones. I hadn't had fresh bread in what seemed like months, though it was really only days.

We discovered that the top of the pass was only a few miles from here, but the cave on the other side was too far away to reach in a single day's travel. Our journey would have to continue into the night, which meant we had to have good weather, or risk being caught out in the open in a storm.

The next day broke bright and clear, but there were ominous clouds moving our way from some of the farther peaks. We decided to spend an extra day, at least, in the cave, to see how things worked out. As it happened, this particular storm swung toward the south before it reached us, but it was too late by then to risk going over the top of the pass. We had our first extended rest since we had entered the forest before the Parnath. That gave my father and mother and I a chance to get reacquainted more, and it was one of the most joyous times of my life.

My father took Marcus into his heart as his son, and my husband could sense that. Their attempts at conversation were awkward, as neither was fluent in Tirzan, and neither knew the other's language. They managed, though, and Marcus told me repeatedly that day, and in the coming days, how highly he regarded Lithnor. He barely remembered his own father, and the memories were not good ones. Marcellus had died when his son was only ten, and his death was due to a drunken brawl in a bar.

On one of those rare times when my attention was diverted from my family, I saw Partius standing off in a corner with Alexi. He was speaking and gesturing in that animated way that was normal for him, but Alexi just stood there with that same sour expression,

making some sign of negation from time to time. I learned later that Partius was trying, without success, to lead him to Christ, as he had done before and would do again.

I spent a little time talking to the two men from Berith, simply because they were my kinsmen. They were only a few years older than me, but they were both from other villages, and had no memory of the raid that had ripped my mother and I from our homes. They possessed a simple, unquestioning faith that simply accepted that God could and would do whatever he said he would do.

When the good weather continued the next day, with no signs of more clouds, we set out once more, with our new friends. There were now thirteen of us, a sizeable group by any standards. The Parnath'oi, as I now called them, would think twice, we hoped, about attacking us, even if four of our number were women. We made good progress to the top of the pass that we had seen from the distance several days before, and the view of the other side was just as breathtaking as the one we had seen before we climbed into the peaks. My father pointed proudly to a land of forests and lakes far below, and off in the distance.

“Berith,” was all he said. My breast swelled with pride, and I had to swallow a great large lump that rose in my throat. After that brief pause, we headed down the trail on the other side of the pass. As predicted, we traveled on into the night, but there was a full moon, and the path was relatively clear. There were a few spots where we had to get off the horses, and a few tense moments when it seemed our mounts would slide down on top of us as they desperately tried to maintain their balance. On the whole, it was less harrowing than that earlier evening when we encountered a similar stretch on the other side.

We reached the last cave around the middle of the night, after the moon had dropped below one of the peaks. Even in the almost total darkness, lighted only by the stars and the light reflected by the waning moon, we were surrounded by a world of brilliant white that seemed to have its own source of light.

We entered the cave, and proceeded to set up camp one last time in the high passes. The horses, who had done all of the walking, were even more tired than we were. They settled down for the night before we even ate supper.

I remember thinking before we went to sleep about that great wall of snow I had seen perched above the cave, and wondering if it might come rushing down on us. I dismissed the idea, and went to sleep nestled in my husband's arms.

Some time during the night, I heard a shout, which woke me up, then a great rumbling roar, louder than anything I had ever heard before. In an instant, we were all out of our blankets, rushing over to where Nociar stood at the cave's entrance. Instead of the blackness of night, all we could see was white. That which I had feared had come to pass after all; the only way out of the cave was buried under tons of snow.